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TOPS IN TAPES

The Movie Buff's Essential Video Library

by Alexandra Mayes

Ask anyone. He or she will tell you that movies are definitely not better than ever, and that the only thing worse than the films aimed at today's young moviegoers —nonclassics such as The Monster

Paul Henreid lights up Bette Davis in *Now Voyager*.

that Devoured Cleveland or Confessions of a Teenage Malcontent—*is the drivel that fills prime-time TV screens. It's getting to the point where any self-respecting couch potato has to think twice before turning on the TV set.*

But though the Lord taketh away, He also giveth—so give thanks for the blessed VCR. It is the redeeming vehicle that lets devoted screen-watchers earn their eyestrain in a worthwhile manner. The VCR promises days and nights filled with only the best and the brightest—the most luminously talented, the most fall-down funny, and the most ravishingly romantic.

Still, all is not celluloid serenity. Among the treasure trove of available videotapes—VHS or Beta—only some are truly worth owning. How can one identify the classics, those that don't suffer from repeated viewing but rather bring blissful comfort to an empty evening or a doleful day? What follows is one happy cassette captive's fiercely subjective list of the required movie classics.

***A SHOT IN THE DARK** (1964): The funniest of the Peter Sellers-as-Inspector Clouseau films and the least known because there is no "Pink Panther" in the title. When was the last time you laughed out loud at a movie? Sellers is at his most madly madcap in this Blake Edwards-directed romp.*

***AN AMERICAN IN PARIS** (1951): Just the recitation of the cast is reason enough to buy this tape: Gene Kelly, Leslie Caron, Oscar Levant, and Georges Guetary. And that's not all: The film was directed by Vincente Minnelli and set to glorious Gershwin music. Not too shabby. This is the musical that caused millions to board planes for the City of Light—despite the fact that it was filmed on a Hollywood back lot. S'wonderful!*

***CASABLANCA** (1942): Play it again, whoever! Welcome the one you never tire of seeing; having an uncut version—the networks think the Paris sequence is eminently dispensable (wrong!)—is the beginning of beautiful friendships with Humphrey Bogart, Ingrid Bergman, Paul Henreid, Claude Rains, Peter Lorre, Sidney Greenstreet, Conrad Veidt, and Dooley Wilson at the piano. By the way, no one ever actually says, "Play it again, Sam"; see for yourself.*

***CITIZEN KANE** (1941): Orson Welles is at his most potent—as actor, author, and director. Movie mavens say that this one marks the beginning of the modern era in filmmaking, but it's fun to watch the extraordinary saga for much more than its historic importance. The story is compelling, the performances are first-rate, and Kane is as close to perfection as any movie ever got.*

***GONE WITH THE WIND** (1939): All it's got going for it is Clark and Vivien, a fantastic supporting cast, a timeless story, a superb script, and a sense of romance and adventure that's never been equaled. This is one of those rare movies that gets better each time you see it. It's the movie about which everybody gives a damn.*

***IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE** (1946): First of all, forget about the colorized version; Frank Capra's classic must be seen in all its black-and-white glory. The networks tend to show this mostly at Christmastime, but it's super any time of the year. James Stewart and Donna Reed are perfectly matched, and helping Clarence win his wings makes for a wonderful evening.*

***NOW VOYAGER** (1942): We're talking major league melodrama here, absolutely the tops in tearjerkers. Bette Davis is in peak form (which is well up into the stratosphere), and it's worth watching this flick just to see Paul Henreid demonstrate the ultimate in multicigarette lighting. Why ask for the moon when you've got this movie?*

***ODD MAN OUT** (1947): Never have the troubles between the Irish and the British been more suspensefully filmed. James Mason stars as a fugitive trying to evade police after a daring robbery, and Carol Reed's direction makes every viewer feel the enormous pressure the hero is forced to endure. This is not the movie to watch if you're after a quiet night's sleep.*

***SINGIN' IN THE RAIN** (1952): Everyone remembers the damp dance that Gene Kelly made immortal, but there's lots more here worth watching. Several of the comedy bits surrounding the arrival of talking pictures are classics, and Donald O'Connor and Debbie Reynolds have never been better. Would it be a sin to say there are even greater dance numbers here than the signature romp? Pure Hollywood hokum, superbly served.*

***THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES** (1946): It won a carload of Academy Awards for its poignant portrayal of Americans immediately after World War II—those returning from battle and those greeting the returnees. The film's humanity—both admirable and disquieting—still speaks eloquently of sadness, sensitivity, and self-sacrifice.* ■

Videocassettes of these classic films can be purchased from the following sources:

New Video by Mail, 276 Third Ave., New York, NY 10010, 800-431-2299, in New York, 212-473-6000.

Movies Unlimited, 6736 Castor Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19149, 800-523-0823, in Pennsylvania, 215-722-8398.

Video F.I.N.D.S., Box 9497, Dept. 609, New Haven, CT 06534-0497, 800-443-7359.

It's a Wonderful Life's perfect couple: James Stewart and Donna Reed.

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